

Don't be fooled by the rocks that I got, I'm still, I'm still Moley with a Glock

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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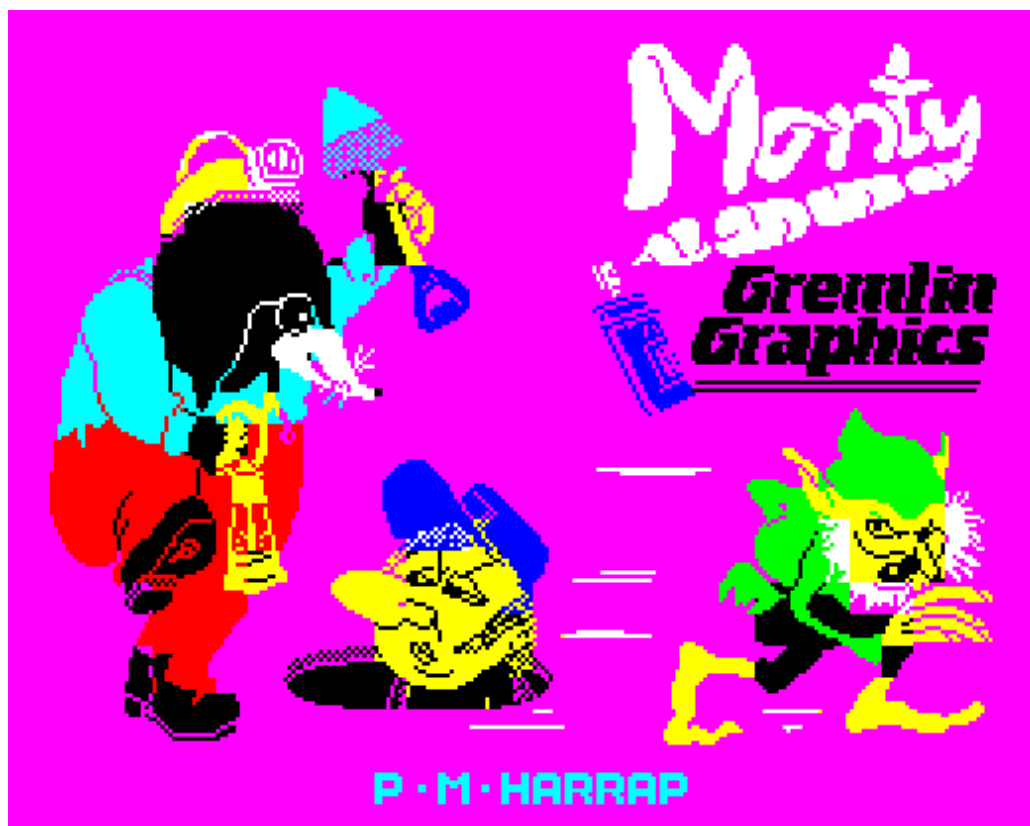
In 1983 Britain was home to 174 operational coal mines; it was a major industry that kept thousands of people employed and their families fed. The following year the decision was taken by the incumbent Conservative party to shut down the bulk of this lifeline and privatise what little remained. Opposition against the government-run National Coal Board's plans was spearheaded by leader of the National Union of Mine-workers, Arthur Scargill, and he was joined by 142,000 striking mine-workers.

Holding the government to ransom by abstaining from doing a job they are already hell-bent on culling may not seem like such an effective strategy, but, but...

Heading the fight against the unsanctioned industrial action was the late erstwhile prime minister, 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher; just one of many reasons she was despised with such vitriol by so many working-class people. Political and civil unrest ensued, dragging on for a year of violent protests, leading to the loss of three lives, and ultimately the closure of the pits.

What has any of this fascinating quarrying trivia got to do with the Amiga? Gremlin Graphics' Peter Harrap, the missing link so to speak. The strikes, Matthew Smith's Manic Miner, and Peter's dad - a mine safety inspector by trade - inspired him to concoct his infamous subterranean Monty Mole character. He went on to star in five tenuously linked computer games for the Sinclair Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 16/64.

First in line at the coalface was 'Wanted: Monty Mole' released in 1984; a primitive platformer that even its daddy who left university to write it describes as a "Jet Set Willy rip-off".

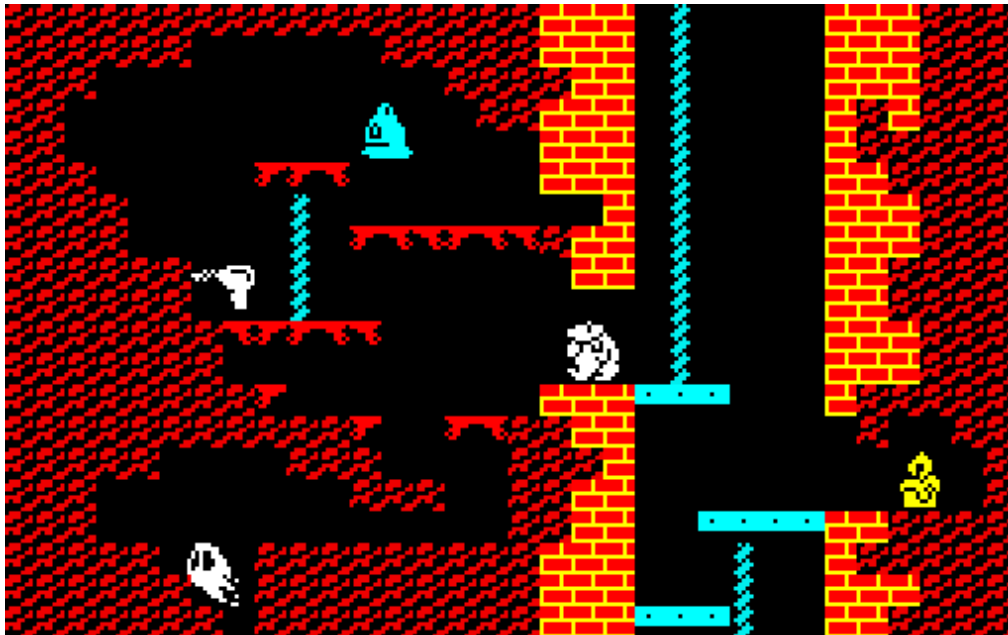


In Peter's first game for Gremlin - and first published title full stop - our one-eyed, monocle-garbed protagonist must navigate an obstacle and critter littered mine attempting to gather up (*steal*/ technically) enough coal to keep his brood toasty over the chilly British winter season. There's a shortage you see because the miners are on strike.

Ill-gotten gains safely secured, he attempts to escape before being turned into a moleskin handbag. Actually I made that last bit up, although this is still popular today and there's even a 'Guild of British Molecatchers' if you're ever in the market for a new hobby. Here our nearly blind chum is more likely to be pounded mercilessly into the ground by one of the randomly mobilised coal crushers.

Already a controversial topic, it transpired that Monty's nemesis is none other than Arthur Scargill; the enemy of the miners who preferred to keep their noses to the grindstone to

ensure the pay cheques kept coming, in the short-term at least. Consequently, Monty and Peter received national coverage on prime-time TV (spotlit in the human interest story slot of ITN's 10 'o' clock news), and also drew the attention of the press who were chomping at the bit to publish anything vaguely relevant as long as it could potentially fuel the raging flames. Gremlin couldn't have hoped for a more fortuitous turn of events, or cheaper publicity.



Peter's inaugural title in the series, devised when he was just 19 years old, taking three months to programme, garnered several accolades including a plaudit for 'best platform game' in 1984 awarded by Crash magazine, and subsequently sold by the bucket load. To show their support for the cause and share the wealth, Gremlin founder Ian Stewart offered to donate five pence per copy sold to the miner's union, only the arrangement fell through when they declined to accept without any explanation.

"In my view Monty Mole will be a future Spectrum hero and there will be posters of him adorning every wall in

Britain. After hearing about this game on the News, I thought it would be a winner, and when it arrived I found I was right. If you liked Manic Miner (is there anyone who doesn't?) you will love Monty Mole because it's a classic platform game, more complicated and, in my opinion, better than Manic Miner. The graphics are certainly up to MM standards and with no serious attribute problems. As to the sound - well the Spectrum's never been up to much on sound, so don't expect too much! I found this game fun to play and certainly addictive. This has got to be one of the best games for the Spectrum this year and definitely worth buying."

92% - Crash! (October 1984)

A sequel - 'Monty is Innocent' - followed in 1985. Driven to the wrong side of the law by the threat of starvation, a desperate Monty lands himself in Scudmore Prison, serving time for the theft of a bucket of coal. Playing as his best friend, the mysterious masked rodent, Sam Stoat, it's your duty to see that justice is brought to bear through emancipating him. By this stage Sam had already performed in the starring role for his own game, 'Sam Stoat: Safebreaker', of which in an interview with C64.com Peter warns, "please don't even look at this even if you have an emulator. It really was that bad!".



"The differences between this game and their previous ones are that the graphics are much more detailed and jazzed up. There are quite a few 3D type scenes which work very well, but on the whole they don't add anything to the game. The game itself seemed quite big at first and indeed you can be exploring for quite a while. But it does become apparent that there is no need to wonder around the entire prison complex to be able to release Monty. In fact there are only a handful of screens that you need to play with. There doesn't seem much actual gaming element in Monty is Innocent, although you do consistently get killed off. But other than avoiding the inmates of the prison and finding the right key, there isn't a tot else to it - it doesn't, for instance, require the arcade skills that were so essential in the previous Monty game. Nice graphics, shame about the game."

78% - Crash issue 14 (March 1985)



Clearly on a roll, in the same year 'Monty on the Run' was published; it's hard to imagine you'd need me to explain the premise other than to convey that Monty's favoured bolthole is across the English Channel to embrace freedom in Europe. This entails switching into a sort of shmup style mode as you take flight, which would have been blummin' impressive at the time.



"The game is very difficult and if you don't like dying on the same bit of screen time after time then you may find it won't appeal to you. Otherwise it's certainly one of the better platform games for the 64."

90% - Zzap! (October 1985)



Believe it or not you can find an advert for one of the magazines that would be reviewing the game, in the game itself! I could make some snarky comment regarding the conflict of interests that would pose, but then game publishers advertised their wares in games mags from day one, and no-one batted an eyelid.



"At last, the true successor to Wanted: Monty Mole, and Peter Harrap's evil sense of games humour is back at work. Whatever was mean in the first game, is now ten times so in this saga of prison escape for the hero mole. One noticeable difference between the two games is that after his exertions in the prison gymnasium, Monty is now a very fit mole indeed and does all his jumping by somersaulting."

94% - Crash! (September 1985)



You don't alienate the critics by playing favourites, so...

In 1987, spoofing the TV comedy-drama *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*, 'Auf Wiedersehen Monty' hit the shelves of John Menzies stores around the country. For this outing the goal is to cavort around Europe accruing sufficient funds to buy the appropriately named Greek island of Montos where our eponymous hero intends to retire to a life of luxury.



**TYNE
SOFT**

**AUF
WIEDERSEHEN
IS LOADING**

Pet ©



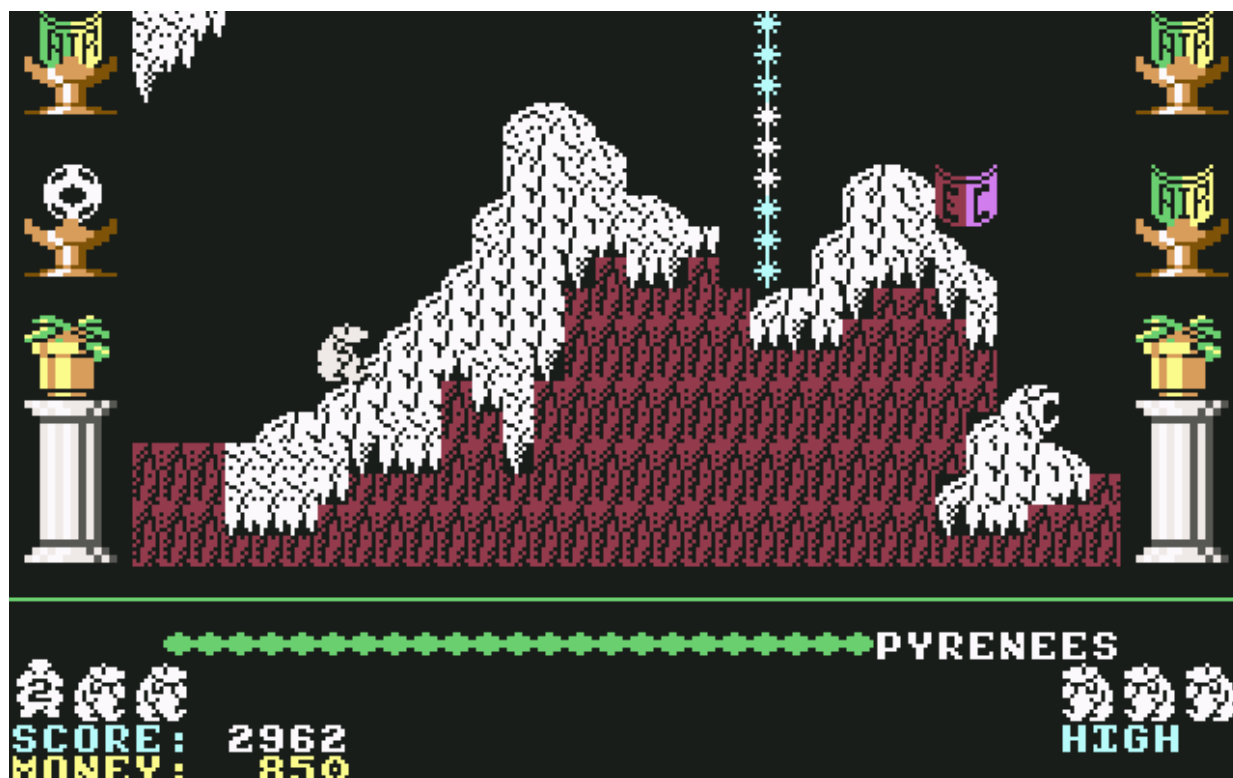
"What? Auf Wiedersehen? Or is this merely Au Revoir? Whichever the case, it's certainly not Bog Off, 'cos Gremlin has kept up the Monty tradition and put together a really top hole multi-screen platform game."

90% - Your Sinclair (June 1987)

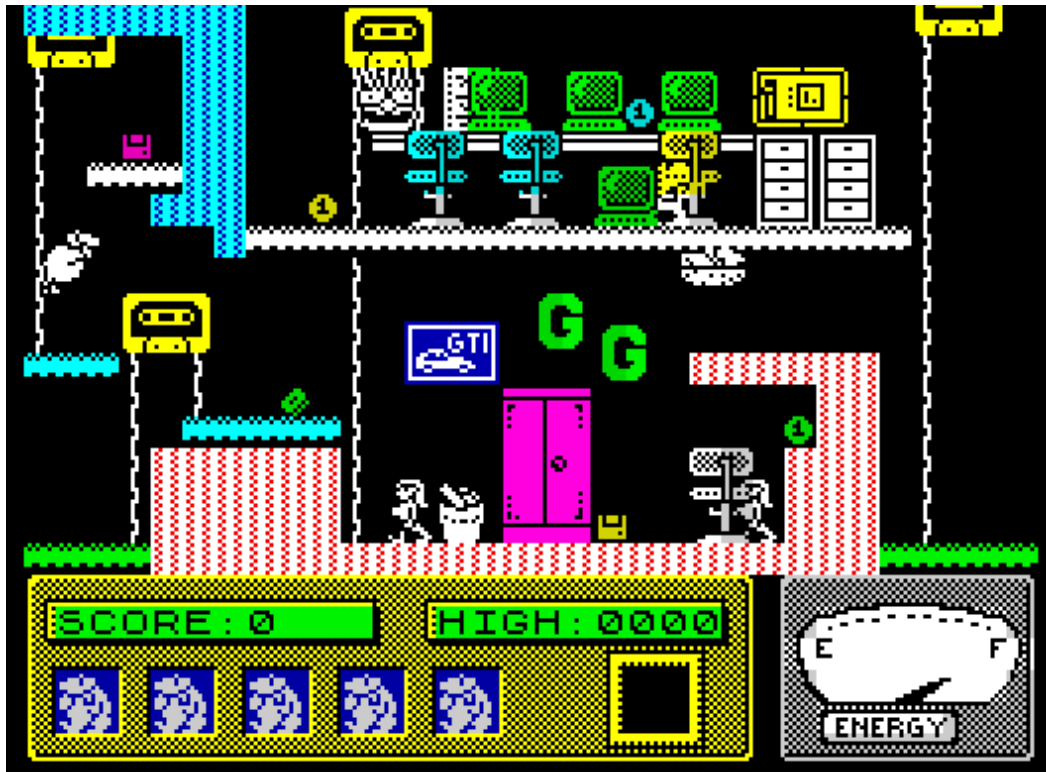


"If you want a hugely challenging, addictive and entertaining platform game then, then Auf Wiedersehen Monty is the one for you."

100% - Computer and Video Games (C64, May 1987)

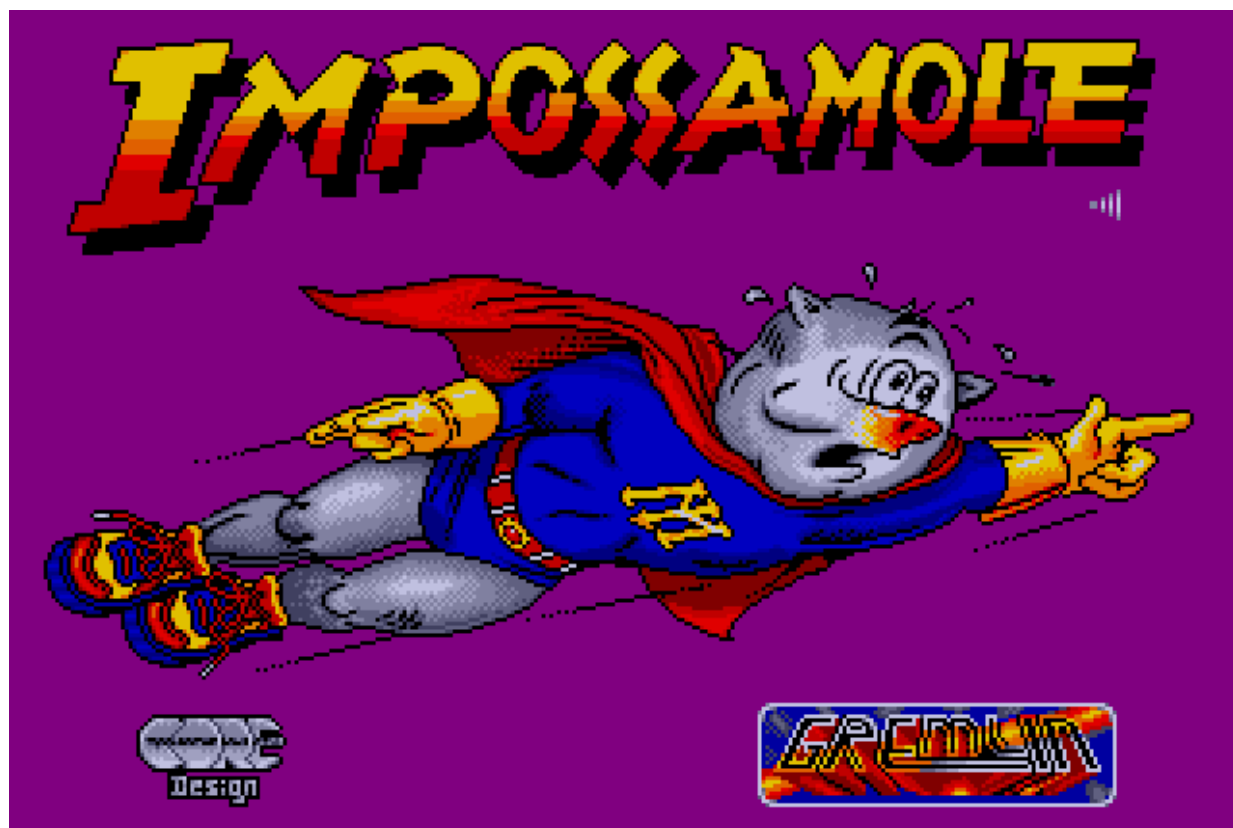


Hot on its heels came 'Moley Christmas', a magazine cover tape giveaway in which you're tasked with safely transporting the game's code from Gremlin's development studio to the offices of Your Sinclair magazine. An ironic predicament that you'd be unable to even attempt to accomplish had a successful transfer not already taken place. I very much doubt the circularity of the impossible conundrum was lost on Gremlin. *That's* the beauty of it.



If you managed to complete the six-screen game and were the first to prove your feat by writing into the Your Sinclair offices to relay the secret message displayed in the finale, you'd be rewarded with a prize; 15 Speccy games from the magazine's own stash. Additionally, six runners-up were offered three.

Still not seeing the Amiga connection, huh? No, you *won't* because these were mostly released before the Amiga's time, or right on the cusp of its emergence as a popular home computer anyway. There *was* however a reboot in 1990 that *did* put in an appearance on the Amiga.



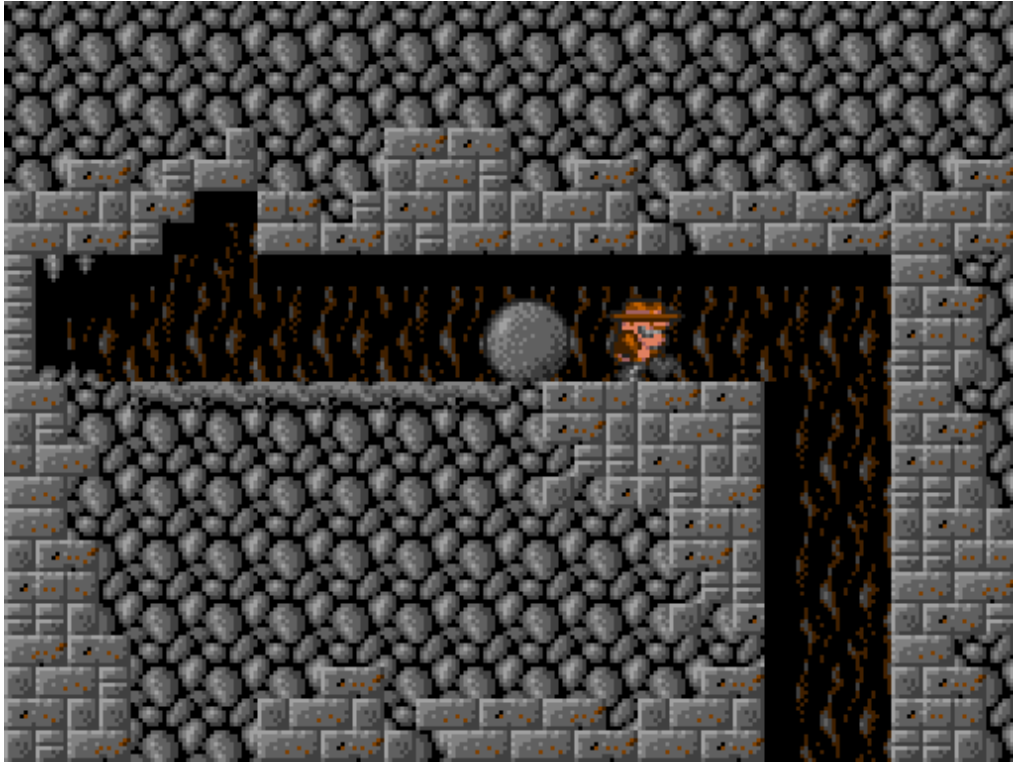
Now working at the behest of creatures from outer space in an effort to recover the sacred scrolls that will grant their race eternal life, Impossamole bears little resemblance to its predecessors aside from pushing the same cartoon Talpidae into the blinding limelight once again. Sporting Superman's red cape (although unable to truly fly) and wielding some serious firepower, Monty is a hero fit for a life of '90s crime-fighting.

Credited to Core Design (a collaboration of former Gremlin employees), though still published by Ian Stewart's studio, the final (or is it?) chapter was released for the Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, BlackBerry, Commodore 64, TurboGrafx-16, and ZX Spectrum.

Impossamole opens with a title card displaying the name of the game in a font that's clearly intended to parody the Indiana Jones insignia, yet it's not as strange an allusion as

you might initially imagine. Core Design were the same team behind Rick Dangerous, which they've never denied was heavily inspired by Indy, and this sixth Monty game borrows many of the same mechanics and graphics, bringing us full circle back to the man in the hat. If you think about it, Indy was kind of a miner too, in a roundabout sort of a (not really) way. Ish.





Looking a lot like a Master System game and playing nothing like the mostly flip-screen originals, Impossamole is certainly a new breed. You're given the choice of music or sound effects, the latter being especially irritating as they emanated from a glitch that was embraced, rather than being ironed out because Gremlin decided that the quirky tones perfectly complimented the otherworldly alien motif.

There are five levels to tackle, four of which can be attempted in any order, reserving the fifth as a well-deserved reward for hard case gaming ninja nut-job types who are undaunted by the crazy difficulty curve.



Each embodies a different theme and is populated with appropriately tropey baddies that lean heavily towards racial and cultural stereotypes, and therefore could be argued are racist if you're predisposed to taking offence when there are far more serious things to worry about. Whereas the more rational thinkers amongst us know that if a trend goes hand in hand with a particular culture, saying you've spotted a pattern doesn't make you a racist. It simply means you have eyes and ears and are putting them to good use.

Each of the five stages are wound up with a guardian battle resulting in the recovery of a scroll, seeing as that's what the plot entails and the box has already been printed.

The story

Monty lay back on his sun lounger and contemplated his situation. His previous adventures had financed these last few years of utter bliss. He had everything that a mole could want. His own island in the sun, more money

than a mole could ever spend - paradise! Listening to the clear blue sea lapping at his furry feet, he surveyed his surroundings and saw nothing but unspoiled beauty. In the last few days, thoughts had appeared in his mind - he somehow missed the days of his adventuring.

Monty closed his eyes and decided to take forty winks. Then the sun seemed to dim on his eyelids. "Just a passing cloud", he thought. But within seconds, the whole island was shrouded in darkness. Opening his eyes, he saw that the island was covered by one large cloud. From the cloud, rays of light beamed out which swirled and darted over the terrain as though they were looking for something. He saw a ray of light advancing towards him and felt "butterflies" erupting into a frenzy in his stomach.

The light settled on his shivering body, smarting his eyes with its searing brightness. Then the voice came...

"Monty Mole."

Monty had been teleported into an alien spacecraft and found himself in the presence of two shadowy figures.

"Who are you?" asked Monty.

The reply came:

"You need not know - you are the chosen one."

"What for?" replied Monty.

"You have been selected to vanquish the Five Guardians."

"What Five Guardians?" Monty replied.

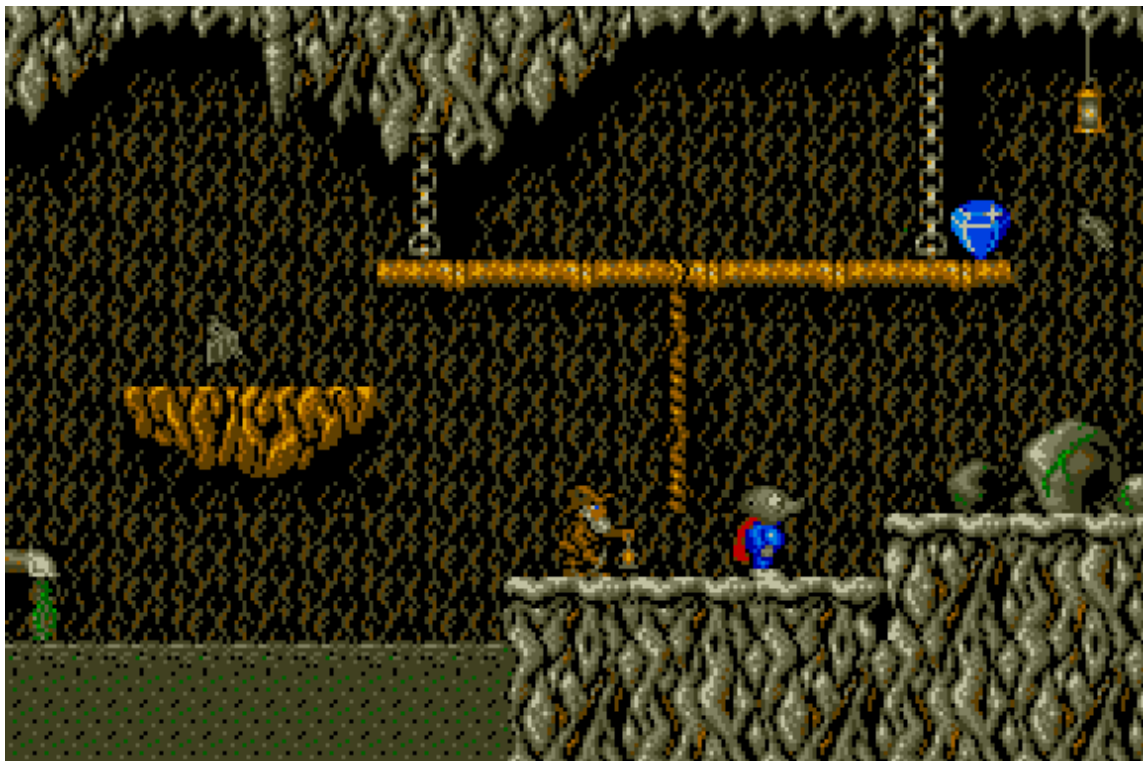
"The ones that stole our sacred scrolls of eternal life, without which our planet will not survive."

"Sounds exciting!" thought Monty.

"But how can I defeat these Guardians?"

"We will give you the use of our sacred superpowers. Use them wisely little mole!"

The Klondike Mines that seem to have been plucked straight out of Rick Dangerous are patrolled by miners, rats, bats, skeletons, and the kind of jabby hidden threat protrusions we've come to associate with the brutally unfair duet of games.



Inhabiting the oriental world are multiple copies of Bruce Lee, fluttering origami birds that stick to you like glue, sumo wrestlers, and indigenous people hidden beneath Asian rice hats. While you're shimmying around these bundles of fun

you may also like to steer clear of the staff-jabbing monkeys that seem to have rolled off the same production line as Alex Kidd. Snap-happy tourists won't do you any harm, they're just distracting whenever their flashes are triggered.



"All in all, a game for the young at heart and patient of nature. There is lots to do and little thought required to it. It does not take too long to suss out who can and who cannot be beaten to a pulp with ease. The additional weaponry which you change upon every so often seems to have a lifespan close to that of a mayfly at a frogs' convention. One of those game which you might play from time to time just to see, but not one which you would rummage through your collection for. A nice effort, a cute character and some passable gameplay."

Amiga Format (60%, July 1990)



In the Amazon jungle you're confronted by snakes, hummingbirds, banana-flinging monkeys, chameleons that unfurl their never-ending tongues at you, mobile Venus the Flytraps (another one of Alex Davis' games as it happens), and wasps fitted with Comic Relief red noses. Traversing swamps is hindered by snapping crocodiles, forcing you to dash rapidly across their perilous snouts like James Bond in Live and Let Die.



Iceland is unsurprisingly littered with polar bears, free-wheeling snowballs, puffins, joyriding Santas in sleighs, abominable snowmen, penguins and Eskimos. Of course, you slide around uncontrollably like a drunken vagabond because everyone loves excessive inertia in platformers. It's the law.



"If you're a Monty fan, don't buy this game - it'll ruin your happy memories. If you've never heard of Monty, avoid it in its own right. Impossamole is slow and tedious, and a bad buy at any price."

Amiga Power (30%, August 1991)



A desert island and ghost ship form the basis of the fifth and final stage; the Bermuda Triangle. Hazards here come in the guise of pirates, seagulls, ghouls, lamp-dwelling genies, alien flying saucers, and inexplicably crash-landed pilots. Picking up an oversized conk elicits the dulcet tones of Barry Manilow who serenades us with his hit song, Bermuda Triangle, of course. Pure genius!



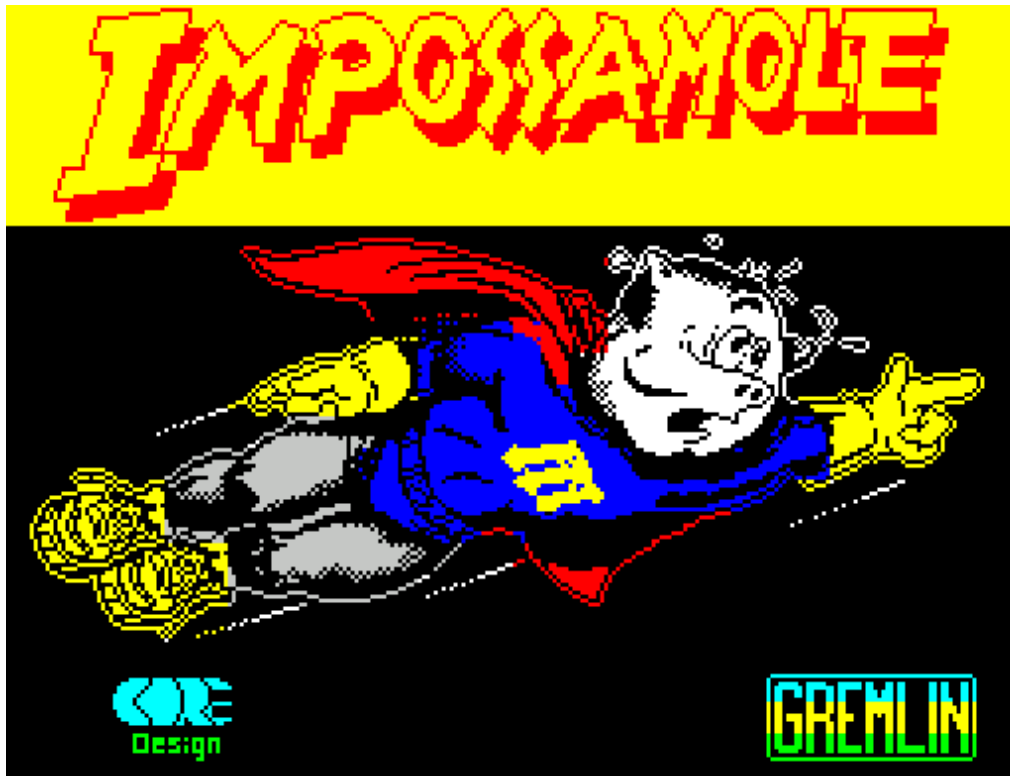
"The different levels and multitude of characters provide some variety, and Benn Daglish's hip-hop remix of Rob Hubbard's original Monty On The Run score serves to create the traditional Monty atmosphere, but at the end of the day, Impossamole's too tough and repetitive. Only the die-hard platform aficionado is going to get much out of this one - and even then it's going to take more than a fair share of patience."

The One (72%, June 1990)



Monty dispatches assailants either by kicking them, or collecting/buying marginally more potent weapons such as bombs, a heat-seeking plasma bazooka or laser gun. You don't find the individual weapons themselves lying around, rather cans of soup that *soup up* your current annihilation gizmo.

Treasures are harvested by killing whatever stands in your way and these can be exchanged in the shop for various power-ups. In the tradition of many an unforgiving vintage game you only have one life and a rapidly depleting energy bar, though this can be replenished by snagging cans of worms.



"I've never been a great Monty Mole fan, and Impossamole does nothing to change my mind. The attacking creatures and backgrounds are both very colourful, but this very often causes colour-clash, and as Monty himself is monochromatic, he changes colour more often than a chameleon. The screen flicks as you move around which is most annoying, and why is it that Monty seems to possess the reactions of a drugged snail? I seemed to have great difficulty moving our hero around with any great urgency."

Crash! (73%, May 1990)



End of level bosses include an enormous burrowing caterpillar that fires triple 'rice grain' (*shrug*) projectiles, sentient trees fought in a clearing reminiscent of the forest scenes found in Ghosts 'n' Goblins, a levitating gigantic ice cream cone, a fire-breathing dragon, and ultimately a cyclonic force of nature. After defeating each of them you take to the skies a la Superman, flying to the next challenge.



"Bright, colourful, cartoon-like fun! Backgrounds are pretty straightforward but sprites and particularly sound liven it up. Sound effects are unusual and not to say wacky samples, and music is a great remix of C64 Monty on the Run, complete with guitar solo, scratching and house chords."

The Games Machine (77%, June 1990)



If you had fun playing Impossamole you have coder, Alex Davis, graphician, Berni Hill and musician, Barry Leitch, to thank. If you hated it then the credits should remain a mystery, you didn't hear them from me.



"So you thought it was crap then? I did too, but they (Gremlin) liked the Amiga one, and the C64 version was an afterthought by that stage... One piece of advice..... Never EVER listen too closely to games designers asking for techno remixes of a classic tune.... The PC Engine version of Impossamole got excellent reviews which was surprising considering that all the music AND the music driver was written from scratch in 4 days... Scheduling wasn't a priority in those days.."

An interview with Barry Leitch by Neil Carr of Remix64.com

What's more, if you preferred Core's follow up title, Chuck Rock, you can still show your appreciation to the Impossamole development team because the engine was re-purposed there.



The Impossamole manual reveals that this was to be the first of Monty's new adventures, yet hindsight would suggest otherwise. Aside from a handful of fan remakes and spin-offs, there have been no new entries in the series since 1990 despite Peter Harrap's attempts to resuscitate the franchise in 2011.

Perhaps what Monty needs to reinvigorate his flagging career is a new cause in which to sink his (no doubt now false) gnashers... all 44 of them trivia fans, more than any other mammal in Britain in fact. That's interesting isn't it boys and girls?

It's not much of a stretch to imagine him operating as an underground (hoho) anti-terrorism informant/spy. I've got it! Islamic extremist weasels descend on the gentle English countryside milieu depicted in *The Wind in the Willows* and wreak havoc, blowing up warrens and contaminating the waterways. In response, Badger calls an emergency crisis assembly to hash out a course of defensive action. It's decided that Monty is the only superhero capable of repelling

the tyranny of the depraved Isis forces (wildlife division) and thus is called to arms once again. Someone get Peter on the phone now!



